

Bike-sharing concept peddled as fine idea

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By [Brian O'Neill](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

On a vacation in Montreal last summer, I encountered a system of some 3,000 bicycles scattered among 300 self-serve stations.

A swipe of a credit card allowed a free 30-minute ride with a drop-off anywhere else one could find another bike rental port. Fees kick in if one rides longer, but it's wildly popular.

Pittsburgh would never go from zero to 3,000 like that, but a Wisconsin company, B-cycle, will be in Market Square from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. today to demonstrate how bike-sharing could begin here.

Bike Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership will follow that up with a lunch-and-learn Friday to pique corporate, foundation and government interest.

Chicago, Washington, Denver, Omaha, Neb., and Des Moines, Iowa, are among the cities that either have or will have bike-sharing systems by summer's end. So why not us?

There's no loose change on Grant Street or in Harrisburg, which means the private sector would almost certainly have to provide the capital, but the demand seems ripe.

Census data indicate the percentage of city commuters who bike to work has tripled in the past 10 years. That's still only 1.4 percent of the city's commuters, but that's enough to put us 15th among the 60 largest American cities.

Combine biking and walking, and we're up to 13.8 percent of the city's commuters, second only to Boston. (Hey, Chicago, put that in your chain and oil it.) That percentage drops to 5 percent countywide, but some suburban commuters might cycle on their lunch hours if a bike were available.

On Wednesday, I biked over to Espresso Amano in Lawrenceville to meet Scott Bricker, head of Bike Pittsburgh, who explained that bike sharing is about transportation, not recreation.

He saw "the East End Plateau" and Downtown as obvious first targets, but added, "I'm hesitant to put my vision out there. I want to learn more, learn what works in other cities."

It takes a cyclist to even know there's an East End Plateau. (Think Oakland, Shadyside, Bloomfield and Highland Park, said Mr. Bricker, of Friendship.) The term's coinage is another indicator that this is not your father's Pittsburgh.

Lee Jones, director of sales and marketing for B-cycle, said its system can be pieced together and expanded "like Lego blocks," but it takes a considerable initial investment. If a city is starting small, as Pittsburgh likely would, the capital cost runs to roughly \$6,000 per bike. That includes installation of solar-powered bike stations, a website and mobile applications that allow riders with smart phones to find out beforehand how many bikes are available.

The company, a subsidiary of Trek Bicycle Corp., launched its first bike share in Denver only last spring, but it now stretches across 12 locations, from the Hawaiian island of Oahu to Spartanburg, S.C., Mr. Jones said.

B-cycle says more than 80 percent of the rides go to "impulse" buyers rather than those paying membership fees, folks pulling out their credit cards after reading the 1-2-3 instructions. Local fees vary.

Ride sharing is still news even to avid cyclists. Bike Pittsburgh's membership has risen from 150 to about 1,500 in just the past five years, but about half of respondents to its current website poll say they aren't sure what a ride-share program is.

"I just want it to be explored," Mr. Bricker said.

Money, or the lack of it, will decide whether Pittsburgh gets this two-wheeled equivalent of the Zipcar, but there should be plenty of people hoping a philanthropist in Spandex shorts arrives, what with the Port Authority cutting bus routes, gasoline draining wallets and Downtown parking meters up to a quarter for five minutes.

Rider fees cover the system's operating costs, but "capital investment is a major hurdle," Mr. Jones said.

As for how noncyclists will feel about, say, 250 cyclists suddenly hitting the streets at lunch hour, Mr. Bricker responds, "Would they prefer 250 more cars driving around Downtown?"

Pittsburgh's ready for this, even if most don't realize it yet. Bike Pittsburgh set up a bike valet at the entrance to Point State Park for the Three Rivers Arts Festival, and more than 240 people dropped off their bikes Saturday to walk around Downtown.

"If you provide it," Mr. Bricker says, "people will use it."

I left him in Lawrenceville and, around 23rd Street in the Strip District picked up the Allegheny River Trail. The prettiest stretch runs past the David L. Lawrence Convention Center and opened just last month. I had it pretty much to myself as I bypassed Downtown traffic.

Pittsburgh is ready for more bikes.

Correction/Clarification: (Published June 10, 2011) Brian O'Neill's column Thursday about B-cycle's bike-share programs in other cities should have mentioned that membership fees are required, typically ranging from \$5 for 24 hours to \$65 annually. Members may take free rides of 30 minutes or less, or pay fees for longer ones.

Read more: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11160/1152419-155-0.stm#ixzz1S5yL1UJ8>